RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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Housing Issues Facing Seasonal Workers

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

This study documents the nature of the housing issues seasonal workers face across Canada. The researchers reviewed literature, analyzed data and interviewed industry sector councils and other industry organizations to collect information about seasonal workers and their housing issues.

DEFINING SEASONAL

Seasonality refers to more-or-less-consistent fluctuations in economic activity and labour market conditions within a year and from year to year. It results from factors, such as the weather, harvest times for crops and fish species and institutional factors, such as school terms and holidays. This study focuses on seasonal changes in employment.

Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Survey of Labour Income and Dynamics (SLID) ask respondents if their jobs are permanent or seasonal. The surveys identify seasonal workers and their characteristics and make it possible to calculate seasonal employment as a proportion of total employment.

DATA ISSUES AND LIMITATIONS

The findings of this study are limited. The most important limitation is the use of LFS and SLID data to estimate the number of seasonal workers and identify their demographics and characteristics. The LFS and SLID provide data on large occupational and industry groups. Limitations on the statistical reliability of the survey data meant that it could not be used for information on specific occupations and industry sub-sectors. The researchers interviewed industry experts to fill this information gap.

The study's data and information sources did not provide information on items of interest such as the relationship of labour mobility and standard of living aspirations to the housing situation of seasonal workers. There was no information on the relationship between the skills transferability of seasonal workers and their housing circumstances. There was limited information about work incentives for seasonal workers and the relationship between incentives and housing issues.

The lack of literature dealing with housing for seasonal workers also limited the study. Existing studies focus primarily on seasonal employment as an economic or labour supply management problem. They pay little attention to the working and living conditions of seasonal employees.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SEASONAL WORKFORCE

SLID data estimates that seasonal workers made up 4.8 per cent—589,000 workers—of the total Canadian workforce.

The most highly seasonal occupational groups are:

1. Primary industry occupations, including farm workers, loggers and fishermen.
2. Art, culture, recreation and sport occupations, including musicians, actors and film camera operators.
3. Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations, including carpenters, electricians and truck drivers.

The occupational analysis shows that a large number of seasonal workers are in sales and service, which includes occupations ranging from cooks to tour guides to teacher assistants.

The most seasonal industry groups are:

1. Fishing, hunting and trapping.
2. Forestry and logging.
3. Agriculture.

The construction industry has the largest number of seasonal workers.

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DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SEASONAL WORKERS

The research study compares the characteristics of seasonal and permanent workers. The study compares age; gender; household composition; education; skill levels; job tenure and duration; number of employers; and degree of unionization. Some key findings are:

- A high percentage of workers under 25 are seasonal workers. LFS and SLID data show that in 2004 and 2005 about 43 per cent—253,270 people—of the seasonal workforce was under 25 years old.
- Males make up between 60 and 65 per cent of the seasonal workforce compared to about one-half of permanent workers.
- There is no significant difference between the family sizes of permanent and seasonal workers.
- Education and skill levels of seasonal workers are significantly below those of permanent workers.
- Permanent employees work in their jobs longer than seasonal workers and a higher per-centage of permanent workers work for one employer.
- The percentage of unionized seasonal workers is significantly less than the percentage of unionized permanent workers.

The study concluded that a high proportion of seasonal workers fall into four overlapping groups:

1. Young—under 25 years—workers.
2. Workers in primary industries.
3. Construction workers.
4. Tourism workers.

Proportionally, the seasonal workforce is higher in rural areas than in urban areas and higher in Atlantic Canada than in the rest of the country. Seasonality is particularly acute in Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island. Although seasonality is greatest in rural and Atlantic Canada, there is a significant degree of seasonality in the urban labour force. One study included in the literature review estimated that 57 per cent of all seasonal workers in the country live in urban areas.

An interesting finding is that there is no consistent, overall pattern for seasonal employment across the country and within provinces. For some industries and regions, there are high levels of employment in winter months; in others, employment is highest in the summer.

The study found conflicting evidence about the growth or decline of seasonality. The literature review and interviews show that seasonality has declined over the past 20 to 25 years. But LFS data for the years 1997 to 2005 show that seasonality, as a percentage of total employment, has remained steady.

The literature review and data collection reports are convincing evidence that seasonal workers have significantly lower earnings than permanent workers. Analysis of LFS data for 2003 shows that seasonal workers in Canada earned 28 per cent less than permanent workers.

The analysis also shows that the percentage of seasonal workers who relied on Employment Insurance (EI) was much higher than the percentage for permanent workers. Research by de Raaf, Kapsalis and Vincent[1] (p. 19-22) has found that:

- Men make up more than two-thirds of seasonal workers who have claimed EI two or three times; and
- Seasonal workers who relied on EI the most often tend to be older than other types of EI claimants.

The research shows that most seasonal workers received EI after being laid off. But EI use varied significantly by region—being significantly higher in Atlantic Canada. The availability of job opportunities and differences in EI eligibility rules by region were factors explaining the regional differences. Further, De Raaf *et al* conclude that their findings dispel the myth that all seasonal workers are frequent EI claimants. These findings show that while most seasonal workers regularly rely on EI, a significant proportion do not.

Foreign guest workers account for a significant proportion of seasonal workers. The literature review shows that the international movement of migrant workers has increased in recent years and is expected to rise further. Migrant workers have been especially important in the agriculture industry in Canada for many years.

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1 de Raaf, Shawn, Kapsalis, Costa and Vincent, Carole, "Seasonal Employment and Reliance on Em-ployment Insurance: Evidence From the SLID", *SRDC Working Paper Series 03-04*, June 2003

HOUSING ISSUES

Research conducted for this project indicates that availability, affordability and adequacy are the most important housing issues faced by seasonal workers. The definitions of affordability and adequacy used in this report are:[2]

- Affordable dwellings cost less than 30 per cent of before-tax household income.
- Adequate dwellings are those reported by their residents as not requiring any major re-pairs. In addition, they have enough bedrooms for the size and makeup of the household as set by the National Occupancy Standards[3] (NOS).

A definition for availability could not be found in the literature reviewed for this study. It is defined in this study as housing that is accessible, obtainable and adequate for seasonal workers. In this context, availability implies that housing is affordable.

There is a great deal of variation in the seasonal workforce. The study shows that housing issues are fundamentally different for:

- Domestic seasonal workers who work and live in the same community.
  They work and live in the same community and own or rent permanent homes. Employers do not provide accommodations.
- Domestic seasonal workers who migrate to their region of work.
  These workers require temporary accommodations. They face fundamentally different issues with the availability, affordability and adequacy of housing than domestic workers. Some employers either provide or subsidize temporary housing.
  The level and form of employer involvement in providing and subsidizing temporary housing depends on a number of factors and varies significantly by industry and even from firm to firm within industries. As a result, it is not possible to generalize about the housing situation of mobile workers.
- Foreign migrant seasonal workers.
  These workers come to Canada through guest worker programs overseen by governments. They face housing issues similar to those of domestic workers, but programs that bring these workers to Canada sometimes set out employer responsibilities for housing.

It is noteworthy that, overall, tourism representatives say that housing is a significant issue for seasonal workers at hotels, resorts and recreational facilities despite employer efforts to provide accommodations.

CONCLUSIONS

Some important conclusions about the housing issues faced by seasonal workers can be drawn from the study.

A high proportion of seasonal workers is young

Almost one-half of seasonal workers are under 25. Policies to improve housing for seasonal workers should focus on young people. The diversity in the circumstances of young people affects their housing needs and circumstances.

For example, students are in a much different situation than non-students. Some students live at home; others travel to remote locations and need temporary accommodations.

This diversity makes it difficult to design housing policies for all young people in the seasonal workforce.

Low-income workers face housing issues

Seasonal workers, who earn low or very low incomes, either because of the industries they work in, the nature of their jobs or their low skills, face serious housing issues. These situations arise to a greater degree in rural areas and Atlantic Canada. Availability, affordability and adequacy of housing may be a problem both for non-mobile workers in rural communities and mobile workers having to find temporary housing away from their home areas. This housing issue reflects low incomes and social marginality, not seasonal work itself.

The role of employers

There can be housing problems if employers actively recruit seasonal workers but neither provide nor ensure that there is housing or provide sub-standard housing. Although the research found no systematic or compelling evidence, in remote construction, mining or forestry work sites or in seasonal agricultural, fishing or tourism operations, employers may not live up to basic responsibilities to provide safe, healthy and affordable housing.

Immigration and economic growth lead to housing issues

The literature review and interviews suggest that the most serious availability happens when seasonal expansion of the workforce coincides with general population growth. Examples are peak season in tourism regions with a limited housing supply, or in economic

2 See: "2001 Census Housing Series: Issue 4 Revised Canada's Metropolitan Areas", *Research Highlight*, CMHC Socio-economic Series 04-008, May 2004, p. 6.

3 According to the National Occupancy Standards, enough bedrooms means one bedroom for each cohabitating adult couple; unattached household member 18 years of age and over; same-sex pair of children under age 18; and additional boy or girl in the family, unless there are two opposite sex siblings under 5 years of age, in which case they are expected to share a bedroom. A household of one individual can occupy a bachelor unit (i.e, a unit with no bedroom).

boom regions such as Fort McMurray, Alta. If there is a shortage of housing generally, seasonal workers may be more vulnerable than other groups seeking housing. They may have lower incomes, they may not be landlords' preferred tenants, or they may not be a priority for municipal authorities or even for employers trying to house their permanent labour force.

Initiatives to address housing issues

Evidence shows that when population growth and peak housing demand combine to pose serious housing problems for seasonal workers, industry leaders and local government authorities are very aware of the issue and make efforts to come up with solutions. In Alberta, for example, employers are developing long-distance commuting systems to meet their labour supply needs without putting further pressure on local housing stock.

Policy implications associated with the diversity of the seasonal workforce

It is very clear from the data that the category "seasonal worker" includes several distinct sub-categories. The differences between the sub-categories are in most cases more significant than the similarities. That makes it impossible to describe set of housing issues that is common to the overall seasonal labour force.

There are housing issues, but they are diverse and disparate, reflecting local housing market and local labour market conditions, not an overall condition for a clearly defined and homogenous segment of the working population.

Overall policy implications of the analysis of this report

This report raises the question of whether housing quality and adequacy issues should be addressed through policy and programs specific to seasonal workers, or whether they should be approached as general housing regulations, enforcement of the building code and other health and safety regulations.

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Housing Research at CMHC

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